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ABSTRACT

Teaching pronunciation is more like gymnastics than linguistics because it involves converting a series of mental processes into motor activity. Many variables contribute to the facility with which a student will learn pronunciation, but age causes the greatest variation in standards of pronunciation learning between individuals. Though increased age may hold disadvantages for learning in some respects, older learners can benefit more than younger learners from formal, specialized, intellectualized teaching methods. The most effective teaching approach to pronunciation considers the individual learner and his learning ability in relation to his age and degree of sophistication as a language learner. (VM)

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THE RIVAL VIRTUES OF INNOCENCE AND SOPHISTICATION: A RATIONALE FOR TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

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THE RIVAL VIRTUES OF INNOCENCE AND SOPHISTICATION: A RATIONALE FOR TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

When we discuss the problems of teaching pronunciation we often mean, in fact, the problems of learning pronunciation. It is always necessary, but it is sometimes difficult, to be certain how far the learning is the result of the teaching: in the realm of pronunciation the inter-relations between learning and teaching are intricately entwined. Every word, every syllable, every phoneme uttered by the teacher may contribute to the learner's learning of pronunciation, not only when the teacher is deliberately and overtly concentrating on teaching pronunciation but equally when he believes he is putting the weight of his teaching on to questions of grammar or vocabulary, or when he is just easing the class along by an exchange of greetings, or telling a little story.

In teaching pronunciation one is teaching parole rather than langue in terms of the European linguist, De Saussure, - or to use a more recent but roughly similar metaphor, performance rather than competence. Pronunciation is the sector of language where the organisation of syntax and semantics, having first been generated in the brain as a series of solely mental processes - silent, instantaneous, electrical and chemical - is converted into motor activity. It is this immensely delicate link between brain and muscles that sets pronunciation apart from all other facets of language except writing, which in any case requires prior mastery of pronunciation before it can in turn be mastered. Any human actions that are psycho-motor in nature, rather than solely mental, are by definition subject to that whole series of limitations which apply to all muscular training. In a sense, teaching pronunciation is more like gymnastics than linguistics.

These, summarily compressed, are a few of the reasons why

teachers of a second or foreign language find that their pupils face special learning difficulties in pronunciation, and why the teachers themselves need a separate rationale to guide them in the teaching of pronunciation. But first it is necessary to look briefly at the prior questions, what pronunciation? and who to?

All organised language instruction should have its aims clearly stated in advance. These aims should specify the dialect and accent selected as a model, the duration and intensity of the course, and the standards of achievement to be set as targets at the end of the course and at major staging-points in the body of the course. Unlike the choice of dialect, the choice of accent is not always as self-evident as it might seem. The dialect which is almost universally selected is Standard English; but the accent that is taught varies in different parts of the world. In the United States and in countries like the Philippines, "General American" is the obvious target. In countries like Nigeria and Singapore it is not so clear what pronunciation is the most appropriate target, since what Clifford Prator calls The British Heresy (in fact it is the British Orthodoxy and the American heresy!) permits the choice of British accent to include non-native variants. Again, there are countries (e.g. Argentina, Chile, Thailand, perhaps Japan) where the choice between an American and a British accent is an open question. The important consequence for the teacher is that he should be aware what the publicly accepted accent is, since he has very special problems and difficulties before him if the target accent is not the same as the teacher himself or herself normally speaks.

The second question (Who is being taught?) leads us into the heart of the topic. Different learners display differences in their pronunciation-learning ability because they each possess a different profile of variables - we shall consider the main variables in a moment; there are other variables which the teacher can choose among in the teaching of pronunciation. A

Rationale for the teaching of pronunciation entails matching the learner's variables by suitable choices from the array of teaching variables. To make the match as efficiently as possible we need first to understand what kind of variables, what differences of ability, are displayed in different individuals, then to assess the range of teaching alternatives, and finally to state principles for relating these two sets of variables.

First, then, the individual learner. In the activity of learning to pronounce a foreign language with accuracy according to a particular model, people vary in several ways. The variations include at least the following:-

1) - <u>variations in willingness to learn</u>,

including acceptance of the idea that he can in fact do so;

2) - <u>variations in greater or less possession of a "good ear"</u>,

normally taken to mean good auditory discrimination together with greater alertness of hearing;

3) - <u>variations in the instinctive ability to mimic</u>,

which entails not only good control of the speech mechanism but also facility in monitoring his own performance;

4) - <u>variations in speed of learning</u>, which covers not only the obvious differences between the slow learner and the fast learner, but probably even the apparent non-learners, who in many cases are just very slow learners;

5) - <u>variations in previous experience of foreign languages</u>,

whether hearing them only, or of learning one or more;

6) - <u>variations in the changes brought on by age</u>.

(See below.)

All six of these variations lead to differences between individuals in the quality and rapidity of their learning, and therefore to the achievement which can be expected of them in a given limited amount of time. On the whole, the extent of the differences between the majority of learners of a given age is relatively small and the younger the learner the less the variation in learning ability. Consequently it is the set of changes brought on by age which cause the greatest variation in standards of pronunciation learning between individuals.

What are the differences brought on by age? Bear in mind that we are talking about a process of mental, physical and social maturation which affects not only what we actually <u>can</u> do, but also what we <u>think</u> we can do, and what we are <u>willing</u> to do. There are both advantages and disadvantages to growing older. It is generally assumed (I think wrongly) that the learner suffers only disadvantages, as far as learning to pronounce a foreign language is concerned. And the disadvantages seem to be these:-

1) - <u>reduced 'plasticity' for language acquisition</u>

in general, beyond adolescence, a disadvantage which is widely believed to exist but which has been very little demonstrated;

2) - <u>reduced auditory discrimination</u>

perhaps because the auditory facility of the young child has so to speak fulfilled its purpose with the acquisition of the sound pattern of his own first language and is less essential thereafter;

3) - <u>inferior power of monitoring his own performance</u>

and of noticing and correcting errors of performance;

4) - reduced powers of mimicry

partly because mimicry is a kind of game-behaviour less commonly indulged in after childhood;

5) - increased shyness

and unwillingness to make unfamiliar noises, or to commit errors, especially in public;

6) - greater reliance on writing

at the expense of speech, especially once the learner is already literate in his own first language.

These disadvantages occur to a differing extent in different individuals, and they increase with age. Few people suffer from them all; most adults suffer from a few of them, at least to a mild extent.

Does it follow, then, that adults are incapable of learning to pronounce a foreign language accurately? Certainly not. In fact, there are three main reasons why adults may be able to learn the pronunciation of a second language as well as younger children can. First, because a small number of adults retain their auditory discrimination, powers of mimicry, etc. unimpaired for all practical purposes since childhood; second, because of what might be called the inherent efficiency of pronunciation teaching; and third, because of certain counter-vailing advantages which older learners possess. The second and third of these three points merit some further discussion.

By "the inherent efficiency of pronunciation teaching" we mean the well-known fact that the majority of sound features are imitated with reasonably good accuracy by the majority of learners, without needing special teaching. This is perhaps not altogether surprising. The total possible range of phonetic

items and systems is fairly small and the degree of overlap between languages is quite large; consequently many sounds are familiar to the learner and present a zero learning load, and his powers of mimicry can be concentrated on less than the whole phonetic and phonological system. What seems to happen is that as the learner grows older the proportion of sounds he can deal with thus automatically declines from, say 80% at age 10 to 70% at age 25. It is difficult to assign a precise figure to the proportion of the sounds an individual manages to learn to pronounce without conscious effort by sheer mimicry, but it is common experience, when the teacher's command of the language is good, that most learners learn most sounds in this way, and that the basic problem of teaching pronunciation is concentrated on the residual sounds that most pupils find difficult and the residual pupils who find most sounds difficult.

These observations lead us to the first of two major principles about learning pronunciation, which will inform our rationale for teaching it. This principle can be stated thus:

Principle No. 1

> Most learners will learn to produce most sound features of a foreign language with reasonable accuracy by mimicry alone, given the opportunity; this ability tends to decrease with age.

Since this principle suggests a pronunciation-learning ability independent of any need for instruction or other external interference, and as a mnemonic, we may call it the Innocence Principle.

In addition to this inherent efficiency of learning pronunciation, we referred to the existence of advantages possessed to a varying extent by adult learners which counterbalance the disadvantages already mentioned. These counterbalancing advantages are:-

1) - the adult has learned how to learn
so that he can take more learning profit from each hour of teaching than the child can;

2) - the adult has greater powers of deliberate concentration on any given task, and his attention-span is much longer;

3) - the adult has less need for inherent interest in the teaching materials
whereas the child's motivation has to be maintained by variety, amusement and subterfuge;

4) - the adult can follow detailed instructions
and can intellectualise his learning, for example by applying general rules, or by learning about the organs of speech, or by the use of phonetic symbols;

5) - in some cases, the adult has greater experience of learning other foreign languages.

Again, not all these advantages apply, or in equal measure, to all adult learners, but most adults possess some of them, and to a fairly advanced degree.

One of the advantages we have mentioned is particularly relevant to this discussion, and that is the adult's ability to follow detailed instructions and to intellectualise his learning - to mentally apply short-cuts in the form of deliberate muscular movements. Once an adult learner has learned (for example) about the nature and function of the soft palate and its connection with nasality, he is then able to control the nasal-oral distinction in his own speech by deliberate, voluntary control of his own organs of speech. But by this example we have already

entered the realm of overt phonetics, when we should first discuss what the main range of teaching techniques is, which can be invoked to assist pupils in learning pronunciation.

Three basic and distinct teaching techniques are to hand:-

(i) exhortation, that is, instructions to imitate and mimic, to make such and such a sound, without further explanation;

(ii) speech training, the construction of special games exercises which entail the use of words or sentences so as to practice particular sounds, sequences of sounds, stress-patterns, rhythm, intonation, etc.;

(iii) practical phonetics, including especially the following categories of teaching technique:

a) description of the organs of speech
b) description of the articulation of sounds
c) description of stress and rhythm
d) ear training (i.e. practice in auditory discrimination)
e) production exercises (i.e. practice in actually making particular sounds, both in words and sentences, and in isolation, and in "nonsense" sequences.)

It will be obvious that these three techniques were listed in ascending order of sophistication, from the standpoint of pupil and teacher alike. Exhortation, after all, requires no special training on the part of the teacher and no special understanding on the part of the learner. "No, Anna: not dis; this. Say this.

This. Again: *this*. Good girl!" We all use this technique all too often, and the chief reason why so many people actually do acquire an acceptable pronunciation is because this technique works pretty well. *Speech training* is already a more deliberately-organised technique. The teacher who introduces a sentence like *These three trees are green* to practice the differences between *th-* in *these* and *th-* in *three*, or to practice the vowel in *three*, is engaged in a low-level form of speech training. Given some ingenuity and imagination and an understanding of the phonetic facts of English, a good teacher can give the class a lot of fun while in fact deliberately teaching special points of pronunciation. *Phonetics* requires yet more prior professional training and demands something rather different, almost intellectual, of the learner, as well. It would be misleading to suggest that there are watertight divisions between exhortation and mimicry, speech training and phonetics, especially since the best results are obtained by the teacher who can call on the particular mixture of techniques that the precise moment requires. But there is nevertheless a sense in which the three techniques represent an ascending order of sophistication for both learner and teacher.

Now, it follows from the nature of the advantages possessed by the adult learner and from the nature of the learning task which each of these techniques requires that the two are in some sense parallel: the more an individual possesses the full range of possible advantages of the adult learner, the more easily he can benefit from sophistication in the teaching techniques that are employed upon him.

We have now reached our second major principle about learning pronunciation, and it can be stated thus:-

Principle No. 2

Older learners can take more benefit than younger learners from formal, specialised, intellectualised teaching methods;

> the more sophisticated the learner, the more sophisticated the instruction that can be used upon him, and the greater the standard of achievement per hour of instruction he will typically reach.

Since this principle is concerned with techniques of learning and teaching which depend on considerable special experience and prior training for both learner and teacher, for mnemonic purposes we shall call it the Sophistication Principle.

Now we are in a position to suggest a rationale for pronunciation teaching that takes account of the principles of both Innocence and Sophistication, is grounded in common sense, and lies within the bounds of good teaching methods. It is deliberately not being claimed or described as a theory of pronunciation teaching, and the statements we shall make about the rationale are probably not capable of being formalised or symbolised in ways that would be necessary before the label "theory" became appropriate. What these statements can provide, however, is a set of principled reasons for selecting an appropriate course of action - that is, a rationale. And it may be that for practical operations in teaching pronunciation it is indeed a rationale and not a theory that the teacher requires.

Teaching is an art: language teaching is a special case of the general category of teaching; pronunciation teaching is yet a further special case of the category of language teaching. It may be that in our very proper respect for theories as a whole, and scientific theories of the most rigorous kind in particular, we have confused the places in our professional activities as language teachers where specific types of intellectual concept belong. Language teaching is one task: establishing linguistic theory is another. Linguistic theory is a source of reference and a fount of ideas and of illumination about language, it is perhaps best of all a cerebral training, which can benefit the understanding of every language teacher. But we have perhaps

been too anxious in the past to transfer scientific theory into the realm of the pedagogical art without the transmogrification, the transmutation, that is essential when moving from one universe of discourse to another. There exists a phonetic theory, and at least one phonological theory, and several theoretical statements about the relation between phonology and syntax or grammar. The point being made here is that for the purpose of establishing the most appropriate teaching methods and techniques for teaching pronunciation to a given group of learners it is not a theory that is required, but a rationale. So now let us suggest such a rationale based on our two principles.

A rationale for pronunciation teaching.

1. The target or model to be learned must be consciously selected and terminal standards of achievement must be formulated, not only in general terms ("adequate intelligibility", "native-like accent", etc.) but as precisely as possible.

2. The most effective teaching approach takes account of the individual learner and of his learning ability in relation to his age and of his degree of sophistication as a language learner.

3. Exhortation, imitation and mimicry will take care of a large portion of the pronunciation learning task, and these techniques should normally be used first, regardless of the age of the learner (they have the advantage of requiring little or no specialised training on the part of the teacher).

4. Remaining problems in learning pronunciation should be tackled through the use of teaching techniques as far along the line of sophistication (i.e. from exhortation at one end

through speech training to the use of practical phonetics at the other) as the learner's own sophistication, and the specialised training of the teacher, permit.

5. As a general guide, young learners will learn best through mimicry with speech training games for interest and for special points of difficulty, but with no use of phonetics; linguistically-sophisticated adults can profit more easily from the deliberate use of drills and exercises in practical ear training and phonetics.

6. Teachers should receive sufficient specialised training to enable them to apply the maximum sophistication of pronunciation-teaching technique that is suitable for the age of their learners.

People who learn a second or foreign language can learn good pronunciation, at any age. They will actually do so in a higher proportion of cases and with greater effectiveness, if the teaching to which they are exposed takes account both of the Principle of Innocence - that is, that most people learn most of the elements of pronunciation easily anyway - and of the rival Principle of Sophistication - that is, that for residual problems it pays to be as sophisticated as the learners can take.

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